

Democracy and Education

Richard J. Bernstein
The New School for Social Research

In the concluding remarks of Alan Ryan's perceptive book on John Dewey, he tells us Dewey's characteristic literary product was the "lay sermon," a late nineteenth-century art form "practiced to perfection by Dewey's hero T.H. Huxley and years earlier in the United States by Ralph Waldo Emerson."¹ He then asks:

Is the lay sermon an apt style for a modern liberal? More nearly than one might think. A great deal of recent social and political writing has operated at one or the other extremes: a concentration on the legal framework of politics or a narrow focus on policy. This has left a substantial hole in the middle ground where Dewey operated. The lay sermon is at home in this middle ground; between pure philosophy and a policy paper lies the terrain of intelligent persuasion.²

Ryan captures the spirit of Dewey when he writes:

Dewey was a visionary. That was his appeal. He was a curious visionary, because he did not speak of a distant goal or city not built with hands. He was a visionary about the here and now, about the potentiality of the modern world, modern society, modern man, and thus, as it happened America and Americans in the twentieth century...[and] he will remain for the foreseeable future a rich source of intellectual nourishment for anyone not absolutely locked within the anxieties of his or her own heart and not absolutely despondent about the prospects of the modern world.³

In this essay, I give a lay sermon, because I believe that we are living in what Hannah Arendt — adopting an expression from Bertold Brecht — called "dark times." When she spoke of "dark times," she was not specifically referring to the horrendous events of the twentieth century that so preoccupied her, but to a more general phenomenon. Dark times arise when "everything that is real or authentic is assaulted by the overwhelming power of 'mere talk' that irresistibly arises out of the public realm, determining every aspect of everyday existence, anticipating and annihilating the sense or nonsense of everything that the future may bring."⁴ Dark times arise when we are overwhelmed by "incomprehensible triviality." Something like this is happening in much of the sloganeering about democracy and education today; it is becoming "mere talk," chatter dominated by clichés that trivialize, obscure, and distort.

But the dark times concerning education are even worse. Teachers and educators are threatened by all sorts of subtle and not so subtle pressures. If we are completely honest, then we must admit that even the philosophy of education is being increasingly marginalized — treated as something peripheral to the tough realities of education in our schools. We have become obsessed with quantitative measures and standardized tests. Any teacher — especially in our elementary schools — who does not focus almost exclusively on "improving" test scores faces serious consequences. This is reaching a stage of parody. It was recently announced that New York City is to embark on "an ambitious experiment" in which 2,500 teachers are "being measured on how much their students improve on annual standardized tests."⁵ And the issue is not restricted to elementary and high schools.

It is creeping into the mentality of administrators in our colleges and universities. "Metrics" is the new buzzword. I did not even know what the word meant when applied to education until a few years ago when I served as Dean of the New School for Social Research. Frankly I was shocked when I discovered that administrators (some of whom had never or rarely taught a class) were demanding that we develop sophisticated quantitative measures to determine that college and graduate students were really benefiting from their education.

Let me be absolutely clear. I am not opposed to quantitative measures (in their proper place). It is difficult to speak about vision or what ought to be the goals of democratic education when children can barely read or write. But I am opposed to the insidious penetration of a corporate mentality that thinks of success and failure in education in the same terms that dominate the business community. What Dewey wrote almost eighty years ago has an uncanny contemporary relevance.⁶

The business mind, having its own conversation and language, its own interests, its own intimate groupings in which men of this mind, in their collective capacity, determine the tone of society at large as well as the government of industrial society, and have more political influence than the government itself.... We now have, although without formal or legal status, a mental and moral corporateness for which history affords no parallel. (*LW* 5, 61)

In citing Dewey, it is not my intent to engage in a sentimental nostalgia. I do not believe in the "good old days" — a most unpragmatic attitude. There is plenty in Dewey that is outdated and deserves to be criticized. Dewey and the classic pragmatic thinkers were primarily concerned with the present and the ways we might reshape and restructure it to achieve desirable future possibilities. I endorse this way of thinking about *our* present. But this is not incompatible with learning from our traditions, engaging in dialogue with them, seeking to appropriate what might still be relevant for confronting our problems and tasks. It is in this spirit that I want to turn to a reconsideration of some of Dewey's thinking about democracy and education. What can we still learn from Dewey and the U.S. pragmatic tradition that might help and guide us in the twenty-first century?

Among modern (and even ancient) philosophers, Dewey stands out as the thinker for whom democracy was the central theme of virtually all his works. From his earliest writings in the 1880s until his death in 1952, Dewey returned over and over again to the meaning of, and the prospects for, democracy. Democracy was not simply one topic among others. The theme of democracy is manifest in his writings on education, aesthetics and art, religion, metaphysics, science, logic, and nature. When Dewey was twenty-nine and a young professor at the University of Michigan, he published his first essay that explicitly dealt with democracy. The very title, "The Ethics of Democracy," announces a theme that pervades and dominates his understanding and vision of democracy. Democracy for Dewey does not exclusively deal with formal political procedures; it is not only a matter of free elections and majority rule. Democracy is a personal ethical way of conducting one's everyday life. He meant this in a rich and thick sense — one that draws upon and reconstructs the Aristotelian tradition of the role of custom in the formation of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and the Hegelian understanding of *Sichlichkeit* (ethical substance).

"The Ethics of Democracy" is a critical review of Sir Henry Maine's attack on the very idea of democracy, and it provided Dewey with an opportunity to sketch what he takes to be the "ideal of democracy." Despite its arcane language, heavily influenced by the Hegelianism that Dewey learned from his mentor George Morris, we can already detect the central themes that Dewey elaborated, refined, and revised during the rest of his life. We get a vivid sense of Maine's disdain for democracy from sentences that Dewey quotes: "[Democracy's] legislation is a wild burst of destructive wantonness; an arbitrary overthrow of all existing institutions, followed by a longer period in which principles put an end to all social and political activity"; "There can be no delusion greater than that democracy is a progressive form of government"; "The establishment of the masses in power is of the blackest omen for all legislation founded in scientific opinion" (*EW* 1, 228). We might think that Maine's critique is perverse and idiosyncratic, but we should not forget that although the word democracy has taken on such a positive aura in our time so that even the most repressive regimes claim to be democratic, Maine is echoing the suspicion about democracy that persisted from Plato's time. Even our Founding Fathers did not think of themselves as creating a new democracy but rather a new republic — one that excluded women, slaves, and many others from active participation.

Dewey tells us that Maine's conception of democracy consists of three main points: (1) "democracy is only a form of government"; (2) "government is simply that which has to do with the relation of subject to sovereign, of political superior to inferior"; and (3) democracy is that form of government in which the sovereign is the multitude of discrete individuals. Dewey strongly objects to all three points and declares that Maine's conception of democracy amounts to little more than the idea of government by "numerical aggregation." The "natural and inevitable" outcome of this notion is the theory of the Social Contract. He bluntly states: "The essence of the 'Social Contract' theory is not the idea of the formation of a contract; it is the idea that men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract" (*EW* 1, 231). Dewey categorically rejects this notion of the "pre-social individual." He declares that the theory that "men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to men, has wholly superseded the theory of men as an aggregate, as a heap of grains of sand needing some factitious mortar to put them into a semblance of order"; "To define democracy simply as the rule of the many, as sovereignty chopped up into mince meat, is to define it as the abrogation of society, as society dissolved, annihilated" (*EW* 1, 231).

The essential sociality of human beings has both descriptive and normative significance for Dewey. He consistently argued that any theory of human beings that fails to acknowledge that they "are not isolated non-social atoms" is defective — a misleading abstraction. On the contrary, human beings, from their birth onwards, are involved in formative social relationships. When the normative consequences of the distinctive sociality of human beings are fully developed, it leads to the idea of democracy. In *The Public and its Problems*, Dewey stated: "Regarded as an idea, democracy is not an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (*LW* 2, 328). Emphasizing the intrinsic sociality of human

beings is not sufficient to characterize democracy: "The heart of the matter is found not in voting nor in counting the votes to see where the majority is formed. It is the process by which the majority is formed" (*EW* 1, 234); "The theory which makes democratic society a mere mass, makes, on the other hand, the democratic citizen a mere minced morsel of the mass, a disorganized fragment" (*EW* 1, 235).

Here we come to the heart of the matter — the vitality of a democratic *ethos* by which citizens engage in discussion, debate, deliberation, and persuasion. The reason why Dewey — even in this early article — objects to thinking of democracy in terms of numerical aggregation is that this fails to appreciate the sense in which every individual is a sovereign citizen. It is a serious mistake to claim, as Maine does, that democracy like all forms of government, consists of two classes, "one of governors, one of the governed." "Government does not mean one class or side of society set over against another. The government is not made up of those who hold office, or who sit in the legislature. It consists of every member of political society" (*EW* 1, 238). The major theme of "The Ethics of Democracy" became the major theme in Dewey's mature understanding of democracy: democracy is first and foremost an ethical way of life.

To say that democracy is only a form of government is like saying that a home is a more or less geometrical arrangement of bricks and mortar; that the church is a building with pews, pulpit and spire. It is true; they certainly are so much. But it is false: they are infinitely more. Democracy, like any other polity, has been finely termed the memory of an historic past, the consciousness of a living present, the idea of the coming future. Democracy, in a word, is social, that is to say an ethical conception, and upon its ethical significance, is based its significance as governmental. Democracy is a form of government only because it is a form of moral and spiritual association. (*EW* 1, 240)

When Dewey speaks of democracy as ethical, he is referring to the cluster of customs, attitudes, sentiments, hopes, aspirations, and actual practices that define the life of a people. Democracy as a form of government is an outgrowth, a manifestation, of this living ethos — "A government springs from a vast mass of sentiments, many vague, some defined, of instincts, of aspirations, of idea, of hopes and fears, of purposes. It is their reflex and incorporation; their projection and outgrowth" (*EW* 1, 240).

But still we may ask, what is really distinctive about a democratic ethos? What distinguishes it from the ethos that is characteristic of other forms of government? The distinguishing feature of democracy is the conviction that *every* human being is capable of personal responsibility and individual initiation. This individualism "is an ethical, not a numerical individualism: it is an individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal, not an individualism of lawlessness" (*EW* 1, 243–4). Dewey calls this ethical individualism "personality"; personality is not a "brute given" — an ontological fact — but rather, a concrete achievement in community life. In democracy every sovereign citizen is capable of achieving this personality and should be encouraged to do so.

What Dewey stresses goes beyond a critique of a distorted understanding of democracy. Throughout his career he was critical of "democratic elitism" or "democratic realism." Democratic realists argue that it is unrealistic to think of a

modern democratic polity as involving the participation of all citizens. Given the complexity of the world and the power of the media to manipulate, the very idea of the informed citizen becomes a myth. A healthy democratic society depends on the wisdom of an “intelligentsia”—a group of experts who make wise policy, informed decisions. Dewey was always deeply suspicious of the claims that democracy requires a special class of experts that have the responsibility to make informed and wise decisions for a democratic polity. This became the central issue in his famous dispute with Walter Lippmann.⁷ Dewey certainly recognizes a positive role for expert knowledge in a democratic community. He always emphasized the importance of developing a proper social science for advancing serious social reform. But ultimately, democratic sovereign citizens must judge and decide — not allegedly wise experts.

This stands at the core of Dewey’s democratic faith. Robert Westbrook eloquently summarizes this faith when he speaks of Dewey’s “belief that democracy as an ethical ideal calls upon men and women to build communities in which the necessary opportunities and resources are available for every individual to realize fully his or her particular capacities and powers through participation in political, social, and cultural life.”⁸ Dewey never wavered in this democratic faith. We can see the continuity of this faith if we compare “The Ethics of Democracy” with the essay that Dewey wrote fifty years later on the occasion of his eightieth birthday, “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us.” He writes:

Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed. That belief is without basis and significance save as it means faith in the possibilities of human nature is exhibited in every human being irrespective of race, color, sex, birth and family, of material or cultural wealth. This faith may be enacted in statutes, but it is only on paper unless it is put in force in the attitudes which human beings display to one another in all incidents and relations of daily life. (*LW* 14, 226)

He goes on to assert in this moving lay sermon that:

Democracy as compared with other ways of life is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs, and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the interactions by which experience is steadied while it is enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of freer and more humane experience in which all share and all contribute. (*LW* 14, 229–30)

The juxtaposition of these essays reveals the fundamental continuity in Dewey’s democratic faith and vision. But what makes Dewey distinctive is that he combined democratic faith with a pragmatic realism. He knew all too well that U.S. history was not only a history of democratic aspirations but a history of brutality, violence, lynching, bigotry, and hypocrisy. His concluding remarks in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” have an uncanny contemporary resonance.

We pride ourselves upon being realistic, desiring a hard-headed cognizance of facts and devotion to mastering the means of life. We pride ourselves upon a practical idealism, a lively

and easily moved faith in the possibilities as yet unrealized, in willingness to make sacrifice in their realization. Idealism easily becomes a sanction of waste and carelessness, and realism a sanction of legal formalism in behalf of things that are — the rights of the possessor. We thus tend to combine a loose and ineffective optimism with assent to the doctrine of take who take can: a deification of power. All peoples at all times have been narrowly realistic in practice and have employed idealization to cover in sentiment and theory their brutalities. But never, perhaps, has the tendency been so dangerous and so tempting as with ourselves. Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is a projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation. And it is a faith which must be nurtured and articulate: surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy. (*MW* 10, 48)

Dewey had a deep appreciation of radical contingency — and contingency does not mean that things always work out for the best. I agree with Sidney Hook that Dewey understood the tragic aspects of human life. Dewey was scornful of those who thought that significant change could be brought about by calls for individual moral reform. This is why education — especially the education of the young — looms so large in his democratic vision.

But before turning directly to Dewey's conception of democratic education, I want to consider how Dewey textured his thinking about democracy. He sharply criticized the laissez-faire mentality, the "pseudoliberalism," that became a rationalization for the status quo. The dominance of the capitalistic concern with economic gain thwarted the development of the type of individual in which a genuine democratic ethos would flourish.

The chief obstacle to the creation of a type of individual whose pattern of thought and desire is enduringly marked by consensus with others, and in whom sociability is one with cooperation in all regular associations is the persistence of that feature of an earlier individualism which defines industry and commerce by ideas of private pecuniary profit.... The virtues that are supposed to attend rugged individualism may be vocally proclaimed, but it takes no great insight to see that what is cherished is measured by its connection with those activities that make for success in business conducted for personal gain. (*LW* 5, 84–5)

I have no doubt that, if he were alive today, Dewey would be a sharp critic of the nefarious consequences of economic globalization. He believed — and I agree — that the greatest dangers to democracy are internal ones, where effective democratic practices are hollowed out, distorted, and undermined. He felt that liberalism, which once served radical ends, was being used and abused to block social reform. The turn toward *praxis* that shaped the young Hegelians and the early Karl Marx also shaped Dewey's outlook. But Dewey was never tempted by the idea of total revolution. He advocated social reform by democratic means. In a late essay, "Democracy is Radical," Dewey reiterated what he had consistently advocated: "The fundamental principle of democracy is that the ends of freedom and individuality for all can be attained only by the means that accord with these ends.... But democratic means and the attainment of democratic ends are one and inseparable" (*LW* 11, 228).

One of the clearest and most forceful statements of Dewey's belief that democratic means are integral to democratic ends is found in his response to Leon Trotsky. In 1937, at the age of seventy-eight, Dewey agreed to serve as chairman of the Commission of Inquiry formed to hear and evaluate the charges made against Trotsky and his son at the infamous Moscow purge trials. Trotsky was then living

in exile in Mexico at the home of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. When Dewey agreed to chair the Commission, Communists and Popular Front sympathizers vilified him; threats were made against his life; both friends and family urged him not to go to Mexico City to attend the inquiry. Nevertheless, Dewey made the arduous trip. He wrote: "But I have given my life to the work of education, which I have conceived to be that public enlightenment in the interests of society. If I finally accepted the responsible post I now occupy, it was because I realized that to act otherwise would be false to my life work" (*LW* 11, 309). The Commission provided one of the first opportunities publicly to expose the horrors of Stalinist terror and the scandal of the purges. Trotsky was exonerated, and afterwards wrote "Their Morals and Ours"; Dewey was invited to respond. Dewey deeply believed that Trotsky, who had been falsely and maliciously charged, deserved a fair public hearing. But Dewey took advantage of the opportunity to state his sharp differences with Trotsky. He opened his response, "Means and Ends," by declaring, "The relation of means and ends has long been an outstanding issue in morals. It has also been a burning issue in political theory" (*LW* 13, 350). He criticizes Trotsky's claim that "the end justifies the means" and condemns him for abandoning the interdependence of means and ends.

Human ends-in-view are never fixed for all time, and ends cannot be divorced from means and their consequences. It is fraudulent — and ultimately incoherent — to claim that democratic ends can be achieved by violent nondemocratic means.

The great lesson for all American radicals and for all sympathizers with the U.S.S.R. is that they must go back and reconsider the whole question of the means of bringing about social changes and of truly democratic methods of approach to social progress... The dictatorship of the proletariat had led to and, I am convinced, always must lead to a dictatorship over the proletariat and the party. I see no reason to believe that something similar would not happen in every country in which an attempt is made to establish a Communist government. (*LW* 11, 331)

Hannah Pitkin and Sara Shumer describe democratic politics in a manner that expresses the very quintessence of Dewey's vision.

Democratic politics is an encounter among people with differing interests, perspectives, and opinions — an encounter in which they reconsider and mutually revise opinions and interests, both individual and common. It happens always in a context of conflict, imperfect knowledge, and uncertainty, but where community action is necessary. The resolutions achieved are always more or less temporary, subject to reconsideration, and rarely unanimous. The substantive common interest is only discovered or created in democratic political struggle, and it remains contested as much as shared. Far from being inimical to democracy, conflict — handled in democratic ways, with openness and persuasion — is what makes democracy work, what makes for mutual revision of opinions and interest.⁹

I hope it is clear that this discussion about democracy is directly relevant to education. If there is an interdependent relation of means and ends, if democratic ends cannot be achieved without democratic means, if the ethos required for the flourishing of democracy is to be cultivated, then the task becomes to nurture those habits, dispositions, emotions, and practices that develop the type of creative individuality that constitutes the democratic ethos.

There has been a lot of nonsense written about Dewey's views on education; Dewey himself unfortunately cannot be fully exonerated from encouraging all sorts

of confusions and misunderstandings. But a few central points ought to be clear. Dewey consistently opposed what he took to be two unacceptable extremes — the extreme of thinking of the child as some sort of savage who needed to be disciplined in an authoritarian manner in order to be educated, and the sentimental idealization of the child that caters to her/his passing whims and fancies. He opposed “deadness and dullness, formalism and routine.” But he also claimed our education is threatened with no greater evil than sentimentalism. Both extremes have a common root: Extreme depreciations of the child morally and intellectually, and sentimental idealizations of him, have their root in a common fallacy. Both spring from taking stages of growth or movement as something cut off and fixed.

When I teach courses dealing with Dewey’s conception of education, I always tell students that a good place to start in understanding Dewey is to consider Socrates’ practices as portrayed in the early Platonic dialogues. What do we witness here? We see Socrates in lively conversation with young people. Typically the discussion and inquiry begin with topics that are familiar to them, such as personal friendship — as we might say today, “meeting them where they are.” It is only gradually that Socrates draws them out, enlarging their experience and bringing out the complexity that is involved in their opinions and views. Here is the core of Dewey’s own understanding of the educational process, its necessary relation to the opinions, attitudes, experiences, and emotions of the child. We start with the child’s life experience not for the purpose of indulging it, but rather to enlarge, enrich, and reconstruct it. Of course, Dewey emphasizes this activity and growth of experience in a democratic community.

As early as 1897, in “My Pedagogic Creed,” he declared “much of present education fails because it neglects [the] fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life.” Dewey hoped that schools would be the beacon for continual democratic reform that he envisioned. But how is this to be accomplished? Certainly not by indoctrination and not by teaching students to improve their test scores. Deweyan education places a rigorous demand and responsibility on teachers to cultivate the virtues required for a thriving democracy: to cultivate critical habits of thinking; to foster creative imagination; to encourage children to cooperate with, listen to, and learn from others, and to treat their classmates with respect and sensitivity. Dewey wanted educators to teach children how to live with real contingency and uncertainty, and with a robust sense of human fallibility. Dewey knew all too well how there can be a craving for certainty, for absolutes — especially at times of perceived crisis. But he argued forcefully that this must be resisted. We have to learn how to think and act — to use Arendt’s phrase — without banisters. Ryan gives a pithy summary of this dimension of Dewey’s educational philosophy:

How to Think makes thinking an active business, but it is unremittingly hostile to any attempt to reduce education to undisciplined activities meant to keep children interested. Such an attempt, Dewey thought, was doubly doomed: The child would get bored, and they would learn nothing. Deweyan education involved gaining a capacity to act intelligently — that is, to formulate plans, to take relevant facts into account, to do what he regarded as particularly difficult: namely, to suspend judgment, hold on to doubt, rethink problems, but never lose sight of the ultimate end-in-view.¹⁰

One dimension of Dewey's thinking that is only recently becoming fully appreciated is his rich understanding of aesthetic consummatory experience and the role it ought to play in all dimensions of human life. This is fundamental to his thinking about democracy and education. Dewey's primary worry is that all our experience is in the process of becoming slack, thin, and incoherent. He sought to counter this tendency. Ultimately his ideal of the good society is one in which experience is enriched and funded with meaning; it is an aesthetic ideal. Aesthetic quality can and ought to be a characteristic of any experience.

The enemies of the aesthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends, submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence, aimless indulgence, on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of experience. (*LW* 10, 47)

What then is Dewey's relevance for today? How can he really help us in dealing with the problems that we educators face today? I think his model of combining a vision of what constitutes a vital democratic ethos with a tough-minded pragmatic realism is one that we still need to emulate. We cannot simply return to Dewey to find solutions to our problems. But we can draw upon Dewey to reinvigorate our current democratic and educational practices. Once again, we find that what Dewey wrote has a contemporary ring:

We have to recreate by deliberate and determined endeavor the kind of democracy which in its origin...was largely a product of a fortunate combination of men and circumstances. If I emphasize that the task is in part because of the depth of the present crisis is due in considerable part to the fact that for a long period we acted as if democracy were something that perpetrated itself automatically....We acted as if our democracy were something that took place mainly in Washington and Albany — or some other state capital — under the impetus of what happened when men and women went to the polls once a year or so.... We can escape from this external way of thinking once we realize in thought and act that democracy is a personal way of individual life; that it signifies the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desires and purpose in all relations of life. (*LW* 14, 225)

The danger that I see today for democratic education is that we can be so overwhelmed by nefarious external pressures — regardless of whether they come from “enlightened” administrators who demand to develop metrics to show quantitatively that students are “improving” their skills, or from political, religious, or ethnic groups that want to dictate what should and should not be taught in our schools — that we will lose our bearings about the democratic goals and aims we are trying to achieve — not in some distant future, but here and now. I do not want to deny that the problems in a classroom can seem overwhelming — especially in some of our worst public schools — or that it is difficult to resist disillusionment and despair. I do not want to deny that, at times, Dewey was overly optimistic about what the schools could achieve in a democratic society. But this is not the Dewey who I most admire. It is rather the more tough-minded Dewey, the thinker who had the courage and the willingness to face new problems wherever and whenever they arose. It is the Dewey who thought that no matter what crises we face or how intractable problems may seem, we must honestly and intelligently ask what is to be done and how to do it. And like Dewey, I believe that this requires intelligence, courage,

imagination, and passionate commitment. There are no formulas for achieving this — just hard work and a willingness to try again. The Dewey who I admire is the one who refused to give in to cynicism or despair — who knew that democracy withers away or becomes meaningless unless we strive over and over again to make it a concrete living reality. It is the Dewey who told us that creating democracy is *always* a task before us.

I think Dewey — and more generally the pragmatic spirit — is not passé, but more relevant than ever. In my book, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11*, I argue that today

we are confronting a clash of mentalities, not a clash of civilizations. A mentality that is drawn to absolutes, alleged moral certainties, and simplistic dichotomies stands in contrast to a mentality that questions the appeal to absolutes in politics and that argues we must not confuse subjective certitude with objective moral certainty, and that is skeptical of an uncritical rigid dichotomy between the forces of evil and the forces of good.¹¹

And following Dewey, I call this opposing mentality “pragmatic fallibilism.” I think this epitomizes what is best and most important about our democratic faith. I also argue — in a Deweyan spirit — that there is no incompatibility between fallibilism and a passionate commitment to oppose injustice and immorality.

I began this lay sermon with reference to the dark times that we are living through. But even in dark times, there is some illumination and hope. Whatever one’s political convictions, one must surely be impressed by a phenomenon that has become manifest in the recent presidential primaries. Millions of people from all walks of life, from all religious and ethnic groups, are getting involved, participating in the democratic process, believing that they as individuals and collectively can have a significant influence on the fate of the country. They are saying, “we want to participate,” and “we want to have a real voice in determining the future of our country.” There is a deep yearning for the very type of democracy that Dewey cherished. We have heard a great deal about the politics of hope in this presidential campaign. I conclude my lay sermon with one of the best definitions of democratic hope — one that epitomizes the pragmatic spirit of Dewey.

Hope implies a deep-seated trust in life that appears absurd to those who lack it.... The worst is always what the hopeful are prepared for. Their trust in life would not be worth much if it had not survived disappointments in the past, while knowledge that the future holds further disappointment demonstrates the continuing need for hope.... Improvidence, a blind faith that things will somehow work out for the best, furnishes a poor substitute for the disposition to see things through even when they don’t.¹²

1. Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: Norton, 1995), 365.

2. *Ibid.*, 366.

3. *Ibid.*, 369.

4. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968), ix.

5. Jennifer Medina, “New York Measuring Teachers by Student Progress on Tests,” *New York Times*, January 21, 2008.

6. All citations to Dewey’s writings are taken from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882–1953: The Electronic Edition*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).

Subsequent references to *The Early Works, 1882–1898*; *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*; and *The Later Works, 1925–1953* will be cited in the text as *EW*, *MW*, and *LW*, respectively, followed by volume and page number (for example, *LW* 5, 61).

7. See Robert Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 294–300.

8. *Ibid.*, xiv.

9. Hannah Pitkin and Sara Shumer, “On Participation,” *Democracy* 2 (1982), 47–8.

10. Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, 145–6.

11. Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), viii.

12. Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991), 81, quoted in Robert B. Westbrook, *Democratic Hope: Pragmatism and the Politics of Truth* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 17. Westbrook’s book is an excellent source for classical and contemporary pragmatic reflections on democracy.



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Democracy and Education
SOURCE: Philos Educ Yearbook 2008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.